

A COMMON
WORD

الموقع الرسمي ل
كلمة مشتركة

Dr Ingrid Mattson

Do we need a Common Word?

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Dr Ingrid Mattson on: “Do we need a Common Word?”

Al-Salam ‘alaykum.

[Opening du’a]

Prince Qazi is my hero as well, but Mufti, Mustafa Ceric is my older hero, my longer hero. Not older, but for a longer time. May Allah protect him and all of us, and continue him in his leadership. To me he is an example to all of us of the kind of leadership that we need, which is real wisdom and steadfastness, in the way of enormous challenges.

We need not just knowledge, but we need this to be able to develop this prophetic character of being able to hold our heads up in dignity but in a humble way, not in an arrogant way. This is the prophetic way, and this is what we see in him and in other leaders who have been such examples for us and have allowed us to move forward and grow in the face of enormous challenges in recent years.

Muslims have always been highly adaptable to diverse situations, which is why Islam is a world religion and not just an Arabian religion. It’s why Muslims have been able to live in all climates and cultures, adopt and adapt, all different language groups, and to make them sacred languages by infusing them with spirit of the Qur’an. So we need to be able to understand what is needed for our time, and since I’ve had the opportunity to serve the Muslim Community in North America, I’ve had to learn many things that I never thought I would have to learn about. And one of those things is how people receive messages, and what it does to them psychologically, even physiologically, because psychological events have a physiological impact on the brain.

So neuroscience has shown, for example, that when people look at images of someone from their group – a group that they identify with - and that means their ethnic group or their national group – a group that they consider to be ‘their people,’ that when people look at those images they experience that event. That perception is experienced as a trauma, as a psychological trauma. It leaves an impact in the brain. When we see things, when we perceive things, neurological connections are formed, new connections in the brain are formed, and the brain is formed. So it’s not just a thought or a memory, as people would have thought in medieval times: that we have images floating around in our brains that can simply be flushed out. But it leaves a real, material, impact on our brain.

What's important about that? What's important is that in a world in which we are flooded with images - and traumatic images - we are being changed as human beings, by what we are seeing. And that the flood of negative images, the flood of traumatic images of people being blown up, of people being abused, of people being tortured, is traumatising us in a real way that has caused us as human beings to be unhealthy, and unstable, unless we have a way of dealing with this. Unless we have a way of taking this event and responding to it in a healthy way that forms a healthy brain and a healthy personality. It's why people who are highly compassionate in their close relationships feel compelled to in fact respond in often a very violent way and even transcend their own limits of ethics and morality, in order to protect those they perceive to be their group members, because of this experience of trauma. So we need to really understand what's happening with human beings in our age, in this age when you are flooded with these negative images in order to respond appropriately.

I've spent many years speaking to people about Islam, public groups, audiences, church groups, civic groups, large and small gatherings of people, and what I've noticed over the past decade is that, let's say within the last four or five years, responses to what I have to say have changed. So I would say that ten years ago, non-Muslims were generally open to learning. They would acknowledge that they didn't know anything about Islam or that they knew very little, that they didn't know Muslims, and so they were open to hearing what we had to say – who we were, how we perceived ourselves and how we defined ourselves. In the last four or five years that has changed.

What I find is that the audiences I speak to have already established a perception of what a Muslim is, what Islam is, and are now very sceptical of what I have to say. I've had people stand up in the audience – so imagine this- an ordinary person saying 'but what you don't understand about Islam, or what you don't know about Muslims is this,' so they are claiming knowledge of Muslims, a knowledge that trumps my knowledge (a knowledge of a professor, a knowledge of someone who's a leader of a Muslim organisation, who has this experience). And it's not simply an act of arrogance – they really do believe they have knowledge of Muslims in Islam. So what's happened? And here again we have to understand how the Muslim mind works.

There's something called the 'anchoring affect' which is that the first time you hear a piece of information about a new concept or event, that forms the category or the de facto position in your mind with respect to that event or that piece of information. So that anchors the information in your brain and afterwards, everything you hear about that subject will be weighed, measured or compared against that initial piece of information. And so if new information comes in, people will either treat it sceptically, they can change their mind but it takes more work, or they can reject it because it conflicts with what they have already learnt.

So what we're dealing with now with regard to non-Muslims and their relationship to Islam, is not a blank slate, they are not simply ignorant to Islam – what our scholars would call 'jahl baseet' – but they have this complex ignorance, meaning that they think they know. And as I said, it's not a question simply of arrogance, but we all as human beings, as people that process knowledge in this way, are susceptible to the same thing. With other pieces of information, with new events, people, we also do the same thing. So how can we deal with this? How can we deal with people who have been traumatised by very violent events, who see a continuing reaffirmation of their fear, because of the continuing flood of traumatic images of who they consider to be their people being harmed? And then people who already have in their minds, this information anchored, about what Islam and Muslims are. So how do we deal with them?

But we need to first understand that this is their state of mind, and extend some compassion to them, acknowledging that. Because it's a state of mind that is fear and that is easily manipulated. So we need to have compassion for people, but also then, with wisdom, guide them to a new understanding. So first - and this is why we constantly find non-Muslims waiting at the end of a two-hour talk about general Islam, to ask one question which is, 'why have Muslims not denounced terrorism? Why are they not louder about the voices of the extremists?' and then of course all of us are very frustrated because we do this all the time. We say that we've denounced violence and acts of terrorism all the time, but of course that information doesn't stick in the way that the bad information does. Those images are not traumatic – a benign image is not traumatic - so it does not affect the human brain in the same way – it doesn't stick. You may see a piece of information in which it says that Muslims met, and they spoke and they talked about what we have in common, but you read it and then it's gone. It's more of an ephemeral event. So these statements that we've been making, and as Shaykh Ceriç said, in our various capacities all these statements and events and documents, they didn't stick with people. And they were still under the impression that most Muslims were complicit in the statements and extreme actions of those other Muslims. This is why it was important to have a message – a positive, accurate and truthful message- that stuck in people's minds. We needed a message that would stay there, and lodge in the brain and be able to dislodge the previous information that was anchored there, and therefore one of the reasons why this message is very important. Because it's a message that sticks. Because it's written in a way, it's been presented in a way, which sticks with people. It could easily have been another message; it could have come from other quarters. It's not necessarily that the precise way this has been written, or the exact numbers of scholars or individuals who signed onto this was the perfect mix. But it's the one that performs the job the best, and because of that, it's one that we should all adopt and promote.

The more people that speak about it with its trademark name (I don't know if its trademark, it should be if not), we should speak about it over and over and over and use a common word, talk about a common word. Because then we will have a message that will stick with people and that will be able to dislodge these former

misconceptions. So that's important. And this is part of strategy in teaching and in giving information. And this is something that Muslims have always understood, that it's not just about the message, but the form of the message.

Allah subhana wa ta'ala revealed the Qur'an in a beautiful form. It's not just the information that's given by Allah subhana wa ta'ala, but it's the form that the Qur'an was revealed in that made it stick with the people. It is of course God's word, God's word revealed in a form that is perfectly receivable to human beings. So we need to understand that the medium, as Marshal McLuhan said, is the message. So we need to grab onto it for that.

I don't want to take up too much time, so let me say a few other things about the common word.

I think it was also important psychologically for Muslims that show that Muslims can exercise leadership. We've been in a defensive position for a long time. And this is not just problematic, not just in terms of psychologically and emotionally draining where we are always having to defend ourselves, but it also shows our lack of setting aside our proper role among humanity, which is that Allah subhana wa ta'ala sent us the message of Islam to be leaders, to be moral and ethical leaders. And we haven't played that role.

So the fact that this came from the Muslim Community, not simply as a response to the Pope (because it would have been easy just to respond), but as a new way, a new form of engagement, is very important. Because it's a reminder to ourselves of our role we need to play on this Earth. And let me say now, that now that it's clear that we've done this, we need to continue to implement it and carry it forward; we should start getting in the habit of being moral and ethical leaders.

If we look at the global economic crisis that's happening for example, we see that Muslims have not been leaders, and looking at issues of economic justice. Although there have been some very outstanding individuals, in terms of the global economy, we have been followers, which is why a number of Muslim countries will now be dragged down as the United States is drowning the drowning man is pulling down others with him. But here's an opportunity for Muslims to stand up forward again with leadership; Islamic finance is based on justice and equality and shared risk which is the opposite of financial principles that have dragged the whole world down into this economic crisis. I hope that Muslims will once again rise (Muslims other than myself – this is not my area of expertise but it's the area of expertise for many others) to the occasion, and show some leadership and say 'look, there is a better way.' And the better way is one in which excessive consumption is something that we shun. We want people to improve their quality of life, but in a way that is fair, just and allows people to live in a community mercifully and that also does not do enormous damage to the Earth.

Finally I would like to say, that I cannot but echo more strongly what Shaykh Mustafa Ceric says about the obligation on your part to implement this message. It's one of the most satisfying things I've seen in the last year is the way that in America Christian groups and local communities have responded to this. What's interesting to me is that across the United States there have been many communities – small churches that have reached out to Muslims in their neighbourhood – wanting to have interfaith engagement. Kind, compassionate and ordinary people, who out of this innate sense of compassion for other human beings reached out to Muslims because they felt that – and saw – that Muslims were under attack and did this as a gesture of kindness and neighbourliness, from their understanding of what a Christian should be. But in response to that intuitive and spontaneous gesture of outrage, there were ideologues in both communities – both in the Muslim Community and Christian Community – who tried to prevent this natural kindness and neighbourliness and compassion from coming together, who said you can't work or you shouldn't speak with those people because they're utterly unlike us.

So our ideology can get in the way of our fitra, our natural kindness, justice and compassion for each other; this natural sense that we do have a connection. That means there needs to be an ideological response, or a theological response, if I can put it in a more positive term. So the common word is very important for that, and for what we're doing, because look at our leaders – both Muslim and Christian – have said; they've affirmed that our outreach to each other is something that is good and that is necessary.

A small community in my neighbourhood, a small community of Franciscans, the Muslim women, and Christian women primarily, had been getting together for coffee and conversation for a number of years. They took this document and the whole community had a receiving/welcoming ceremony for it. It's a beautiful thing on a very small scale, but in the end, those are the people who are going to protect us, who are going to speak for us, who are our allies, and on a larger scale, in a place like the United States, who are going to vote for those leaders, who are for engaging and dialogue, or who are for conflict and disharmony.

So please, take up the document, take up the challenge, think of all the creative ways you can implement it, and I believe it will continue to be (and we will see over time) even more important than it was in the beginning.

Thank you.

Al-salam 'alaykum.



About Dr Ingrid Mattson

Dr. Ingrid Mattson, Ph.D. is a Canadian Muslim convert professor and activist and the current president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).

She was born and raised in Ontario, and studied philosophy and fine arts at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. Raised as a Catholic, she ultimately abandoned religion "for good" during her teenage years, but embraced Islam at the end of her undergraduate studies. She then travelled to Pakistan where she worked with Afghan refugees for a year.

She earned her Ph.D. in Islamic studies from the University of Chicago in 1999. She went on to be very active in educating Canadian Muslims to become active participants in Canadian society at large.

She is now Director of Islamic Chaplaincy and Professor at the Macdonald Center for Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, the first Islamic chaplaincy program in the United States.

In 2001 she was elected Vice-President of ISNA and in 2006 she was elected President of the organization. She has guest lectured at such institutions as the US Naval Academy.

Dr. Mattson is the first female to lead the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).

For more information about this speaker or to view the iKhutbah, please visit www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk